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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4857  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2629  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2494  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3101  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3343

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 000260

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/24/2019

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: ELECTION COMMISSION CHAIRMAN STILL  
LIVING IN ANOTHER ERA

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles, reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a meeting with State Department assistance officials, the Chairman of the Central Elections Commission spoke at length about Turkmenistan's progress in reforming its electoral process, evidenced by the conduct of recent parliamentary elections. He showed no interest in assistance to reform basic electoral laws or to develop outlets for electoral information. Despite the changes highlighted by the Chairman, continuity, not grassroots reform, remains the defining trait of Turkmenistan's electoral system. END SUMMARY.

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS: A SERIES OF "FIRSTS"

¶2. (SBU) On February 24, EUR/ACE Coordinator, Dan Rosenblum, and Central Asia Desk Officer, Dean Fischer, discussed recent parliamentary elections with the Chairman of the Central Election Commission (CEC), Murat Garriyev. The Chairman was effusive about the December 2008 event, listing what he referred to as a series of "firsts" that signified the elections were a significant development beyond past practice. Key among these innovations were: the participation of foreign election observers; the election of a newly-configured parliament consisting of 125 members; granting the right to vote to prisoners in pre-trial detention; the establishment of polling stations in 27 Turkmen Embassies; and in most cases, three candidates vying for each seat.

¶3. (SBU) Garriyev pointed out that when President Berdimuhamedov campaigned for election as President in 2007, he had said that, if elected, there would be an "open door" policy. In so far as the "open door" involved elections, Garriyev said the invitation of foreign observers was the result. He noted that 80 countries and organizations expressed interest in observing the elections, and that all who expressed interest received invitations. Garriyev explained how the CEC organized travel for observers to reach remote areas at their request. He also showed pride in the holiday atmosphere that accompanied the elections, with food, music and shopping in the vicinity of polling stations. According to the Chairman, 89 percent of eligible voters participated in the voting, 70 percent of whom voted before 2:00 p.m.

14. (SBU) On the subject of possible assistance, Garriyev mentioned that the CEC could use modern equipment such as computers for its 2,118 polling stations. Rosenblum clarified that equipment was only one aspect of possible U.S. assistance, in addition to areas such as expertise on the legal basis for conducting elections and developing the means by which voters receive electoral information. The Chairman then backtracked, saying that polling stations are well-equipped and that all election expenses were paid for by the Turkmen Government, in contrast to the practice in the U.S. where wealthy people "invest" in the process. He mentioned the clear lucite ballot boxes used on election day, misspeaking and referring to them as an example of "President Turkmenbashy Niyazov's policy of openness." After a moment, a fellow commission member subtly pointed out that the Chairman had meant to refer to President Berdimuhamedov.

15. (C) COMMENT: Although the "firsts" fall far short of meeting international standards, from the Chairman's perspective, change is in the air and they are delivering on President Berdimuhamedov's promises to reform. Nonetheless, change is gradual and the electoral landscape is characterized by continuity, to such an extent that the Chairman was briefly able to forget, more than two year's after Niyazov's death, that the former leader was no longer in charge. END COMMENT.

MILES